

# NEWS RELEASE

Maine Department of Education, J. Duke Albanese, Commissioner

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## **Student Performance on Statewide MEA Tests Is Stable**

*Latest 2000-2001 Scores are Part of a Three Year Baseline Period*

### **Preliminary Trend of Improvement in Writing Scores Is Evident**

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**Augusta** – Today, Commissioner of Education J. Duke Albanese released the results from the statewide Maine Educational Assessment (MEA) for the 2000 – 2001 school year. Commissioner Albanese said the results from the MEA tests, redesigned in 1998 to measure the State’s *Learning Results* standards for what children should know and be able to do, will be combined with previous results from 1998-99 and 1999-2000 in order to set an important student performance baseline for determining the progress of schools over the next several years. Results will help school districts, schools, and classroom teachers improve programs and instruction to move all students to higher levels of achievement. Although stressing how preliminary these results are in judging long-term performance trends, the Commissioner indicated that results from the first three years show notable improvement in writing scores at both grades 8 and 11.

Although the State was required by law to revise the MEA tests in 1998-99, schools are required to implement the state’s *Learning Results* standards beginning in the 2002 – 2003 school year. Under legislation enacted last spring, school districts must have local assessment systems in place to measure student performance relative to *Learning Results* by 2004, and will use these local systems to award high school diplomas to the graduation class of 2007.

Albanese observed, “Given that these results mark performance two years before the state standards go into effect, three years before local schools adopt their own ways of measuring these new standards, and six years before these new local measures are used for high school graduation, we must view these results truly as a preliminary snapshot and a baseline to measure improvement. The reforms underway in our schools today will not come to fruition for several years, and then will take time to fully impact student achievement.” Albanese pointed out that since the MEA testing program began in 1985-86, Maine students have shown remarkable long-term improvement in a number of content areas.

“Although Maine’s performance has been strong, and has improved significantly over the past 15 years, it is not where we need be. Our education reform efforts target all students, not just some students for higher levels of literacy. These new results clearly show the challenge facing Maine educators as we seek to move all students to higher performance. In some content areas, too many of our students are in the Does Not Meet Standards category, and do not demonstrate even partial mastery of our academic standards. We must meet this challenge; I believe we can meet this challenge. We need to equip all of our youth with much higher levels of literacy if they are going to succeed in the society and

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economy of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The way to move to higher standards is with clear goals in Maine's *Learning Results* and a focus on the achievement of each individual student, not just average results," Albanese said.

Under Maine policy, unlike in some other states, the MEA tests will not be used as a single "high stakes" graduation exam for high school seniors. Local school districts will determine how to use the MEA in combination with their local measures to set graduation criteria. Albanese said, "Although standardized, pencil-and-paper tests have a role in providing critical information and reinforcing the consistency of local measures, we know that such tests simply cannot measure all the facets of what students know and are able to do, and we also know that some students simply do not perform well in a test environment. That is why Maine is developing complementary local systems of measurement that are broader and richer, and that will be used for important decisions such as graduation. The MEA will help to check and confirm the results of these systems."

Albanese also noted that state policymakers do not believe that the MEA or a similar test should be given to students annually in grades 3 through 8, as proposed under pending federal legislation. "Time and resources should go into the development of comprehensive, reliable local measurement of student performance on an annual basis with portfolios, research projects, and exhibitions, not into more standardized testing."

The redesigned MEA produces test results for individual students at grades four, eight, and eleven in English language arts (reading and writing), mathematics, science and technology, and social studies. Two additional MEA tests in health education and visual and performing arts are designed to produce only school level results. Testing time consists of approximately 60% "constructed response" questions (essays), and 40% "selected response" or multiple-choice.

In order to support program design and the adaptation of instruction, extensive data is returned to local schools, including district reports, school reports, classroom reports, and individual student reports. Detailed information is provided on the performance of students on every type of test item, and schools even receive copies of actual student essays on CD-ROM so that teachers can themselves compare student scores to the work produced by the student. Thus, teachers can be provided with rich information to judge areas of strength and weakness for each student or the whole class, and to modify their instruction and lessons accordingly.

Albanese also noted that the MEA tests produce a broad array of statewide data that breaks down student and school performance by demographic group, school size and other features, types of instructional strategies used, home characteristics, and more that provides insight into best practices. Over the next several weeks, Department staff will analyze and release additional profiles that will provide a more complete picture of the trends in every content area.

The new MEA focuses attention on whether a student's work meets the standards, rather than the student's relative performance compared to other students. Hundreds of Maine teachers and citizens participated in determining "how good was good enough" in matching student work with the standards in the *Learning Results*. The MEA describes student work relative to four performance categories tied to

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the standards of *Learning Results*: Exceeds the Standards, Meets the Standards, Partially Meets the Standards, and Does Not Meet the Standards. In addition, students and schools are assigned a scaled score related to the performance category, ranging from 501 to 580.

To help put this reporting format in context, Commissioner Albanese observed that the *Learning Results* and the MEA embody academic standards that are as high or higher than those used in the Nation's Report Card, The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), although the NAEP uses different terminology (Basic, Proficient, and Advanced) to describe their similar levels of student performance. For this reason, Commissioner Albanese describes the Partially Meets, Meets, and Exceeds levels of performance as progressive levels of success. Two graphs showing a comparison of Maine 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade student performance on NAEP compared to the nation and to performance on the MEA may be found at the Maine Department of Education website at <http://www.state.me.us/education.htm>. Click on the heading *Understanding the MEA*.

“The *Learning Results* are rigorous standards, not minimal standards. Students who Partially Meet the standards do show some strong evidence of mastery, but their mastery is inconsistent across the content. These are students that are moving toward rigorous levels of performance,” Albanese said. Thus, a major focus initially is to move students towards at least partial mastery and out of the “Does Not Meet the Standards” category.

Maine students have a history of exceptionally strong performance on national testing over the past decade. In 2000, Maine eighth graders were 3<sup>rd</sup> in the country in Mathematics, and fourth graders also scored among the top 10 states in the country. In 1998, Maine eighth graders were 1<sup>st</sup> in the nation in Reading and 2<sup>nd</sup> in the nation in Writing on the NAEP tests, while Maine fourth graders scored 4<sup>th</sup> in the nation in Reading. In 1996, Maine's fourth and eighth graders shared top national honors in Mathematics, with the eighth graders also topping the charts in Science. Similar results were achieved in 1992 and 1994 test administrations. As a result of sustained, strong overall performance on dozens of education indicators, Maine was ranked as the best kindergarten to grade 12 education system in America in 1999, according to the 10<sup>th</sup> annual report of the National Education Goals Panel.

The analysis of MEA performance over the past three years clearly shows that average scale scores have been stable despite necessary refinements in the test design and administration schedule. MEA scale score averages have not varied more than plus or minus two points in any content areas, except for improvements in writing at grades 8 and 11. The percentage of students scoring in each of the performance levels superficially appears to show more variation in performance, but this effect is largely due to slight changes as students move just slightly above or below the cutoff for each performance level.

The writing results for grades 8 and 11 show impressive early gains in the percent of students who Meet or Exceed the MEA performance standards. The percentage of grade 8 students who Meet or Exceed the standards has increased from 25% in the 1998-1999 assessment to 39% in the 2000-2001 assessment. There has been a corresponding drop in the Does Not Meet the standards category from 17% of students in 1998-1999 to 10% of students in 2000-2001. The percentage of grade 11 students

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who Meet or Exceed the standards have increased from 31% in 1998-1999 to 41% in 2000-2001. A corresponding drop in the percentage of grade 11 students scoring in the Does Not Meet the standards level shows 16% in 1998-1999 and 9 % in 2000-2001. At grade 4, student performance over the three-year period of analysis is variable from year to year with no clear trend appearing.

The MEA writing assessment is composed of two writing opportunities for students. The first opportunity provides for development of an essay, which is scored for both development and English language conventions. A second writing prompt is included within the reading section of the MEA assessment. The two writing prompts assess students writing ability for a variety of purposes and contexts. Maine teachers who are trained to score consistently against the new performance standards do the scoring of the first prompt.

Press materials, including graphs with statewide data tables showing each grade and *Learning Results* content area tested over the period, as well as the percent of students scoring at each performance level, are available on the web at <http://www.state.me.us/education/> under *New and Hot Topics* by clicking on *2000-01 MEA Results*. In addition, a three-year cumulative average is shown for each grade and content area.

The summary scores for each school may also be found on the Maine Department of Education web-site at <http://www.state.me.us/education/> in two separate formats. If interested in the performance of a small number of schools or districts click on *School Profile* for a summary chart of each school or district. If interested in viewing the performance of many schools, click on *Understanding the MEA* for a spreadsheet s listing the performance for each school.

The Department's *School Profiles* are accessible to the general public and provide detailed MEA performance data from each individual school in the state, as well as other useful comparative data.